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ABSTRACT

This paper posits that metaphor, in addition to embellishing language, promotes a comprehensive understanding of complex concepts and phenomena and provides teachers with a powerful way to talk about their work. The main body of this document, which includes an extensive review of the literature, considers the use of metaphors for mentoring in the preparation of mentors and in research on mentoring. Interviews and surveys were conducted with experienced teacher mentors (N=137) who were asked to provide metaphors, comparisons, or analogies for mentoring. The study revealed that the most common metaphors used to describe mentoring focused on interpersonal relationships such as the relationship between parent and child; that many subjects compared mentoring to teaching; that several subjects compared mentoring to problem prevention or providing emergency services; that some subjects viewed the role of the mentor as one of providing direction; and that several subjects referred to growth and development in their metaphors (e.g. like watching a flower bloom). Based on informants' suggestions, it was concluded that metaphors are useful in elucidating the complexities of mentoring and the mentoring relationship. (Contains 40 references.) (LL)

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Metaphors for Mentoring: An Exploratory Study

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Metaphors for Mentoring: An Exploratory Study

The literature on mentoring indicates that the role of the mentor is complex. Comprehensive descriptions and accounts of what mentors do and the part they can play in the professional development of beginning teachers often employ analogies, metaphors, and other types of comparisons in an attempt to capture the quintessence of mentoring (DeBolt, 1992a, Odell, 1990). Very often the mentor is described as a patron, a sponsor, or a guide, and sometimes as a close relative, usually an older brother or sister. The comparison is stretched even further when the mentor is viewed as a guardian angel or a fairy godmother.

Despite the frequency with which mentors and mentoring are treated metaphorically, there has been no systematic attempt to explore this phenomenon. This paper seeks to fill this void by examining various metaphors used by mentors to describe the experience of mentoring and suggesting how an understanding of metaphors for mentoring can be useful in the preparation of mentors and in research on mentoring.

The paper is organized in four sections. First, metaphors are examined as tools that can be used to understand complex phenomena. Second, the place of metaphors in studying education is considered. The third section of the paper presents findings of interviews and surveys of mentors who were asked to provide metaphors, comparisons, or analogies for mentoring. In the final

section of the paper, suggestions are provided for using metaphors for mentoring in the preparation of mentors and in research on mentoring.

Metaphors as Tools

This paper is based on the premise that metaphor is much more than an embellishment of language. Aspin (1984) suggests that there is no language without metaphor and Taylor (1984a) maintains that metaphor serves an important role in ordering and structuring discourse. From an anthropological perspective, Collins and Green (1980) argue that the acquisition of cultural knowledge includes the acquisition of shared metaphors.

In their seminal works on metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1981) argue that metaphors are basic to understanding, thought, and action. They suggest that "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (1981, p. 287). They view metaphor as a powerful tool for "trying to comprehend what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness (1980, p. 193).

Metaphors are associated with human feelings and behavior. For example, Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp, and Cohn (1989) suggest that metaphors provide "a means by which to cope with fears and apprehensions about oneself and expectations about the job of being a teacher" (p. 557). Dickmeyer (1989) makes a similar point when he points out that certain metaphors for

learning (e.g., the student as a vessel and learning as a liquid to be poured into the vessel) are reassuring to teachers when faced with uncertainty about how learning occurs. In addition, metaphors can arouse feelings, and prompt and justify actions (Elliot, 1984; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Connelly and Clandinin (1988) see metaphors as "an important part of our personal practical knowledge" (p. 66). Morgan (1986), focusing on complex organizations, refers to "the injunction of the metaphor" (p. 331, emphasis in original). He writes that metaphors give us "systematic ways of thinking about how we can or should act in a given situation" (p. 331).

When metaphors are accepted as more than figures of speech, their principal value lies in promoting an engaging and comprehensive understanding of complex concepts and phenomena. To accomplish this, metaphors catch the hearer's attention and direct it to a certain topic, issue, problem, etc., (Aspin, 1984; Johnson, 1981). Metaphors encourage reflection by promoting a confrontation with one's beliefs and images, and the opportunity to think about self "contextually and developmentally" (Bullough & Stokes, 1994, p. 220). Metaphors also foster an understanding of complex concepts by drawing attention to their important features. Dickmeyer (1989) notes, "To the extent that the metaphors emphasize a key characteristic of the system, and to the extent that we can manage the key characteristic, metaphors can be extremely helpful in our understanding of the phenomenon"

(p. 152). Metaphors accomplish this by imposing patterns and providing coherent structures (Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Provenzo et al., 1989; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Finally, metaphors promote alternative ways of seeing and comparing phenomena, acting like "miniature works of art that produce imaginative insights" (Johnson, 1981, p. 40).

Multiple metaphors and new metaphors are especially useful in understanding phenomena. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that having multiple and sometimes inconsistent metaphors for a single concept reflects the tendency of metaphors to highlight certain aspects of a concept, idea, or experience while hiding others. Morgan (1986) believes that using different metaphors to understand "the complex and paradoxical character of organizational life" (p. 14) is reasonable when one recognizes that "organizations can be many things at one and the same time" (p. 321). He also believes that bringing multiple metaphors to bear on a complex phenomenon reflects the inherent limitations of any single perspective.

There is also an important role for new metaphors. Lakhoff and Johnson (1980) distinguish conventional metaphors which structure the ordinary conceptual system of a culture in everyday language from innovative metaphors which can foster a new understanding of experience. A change in metaphor or the introduction of a new metaphor suggests an alteration in how the world is conceived and experienced. Johnson (1981) notes,

"Because our world is an imaginative, value-laden construction, metaphors that alter our conceptual structures (themselves conceived by older metaphors) will also alter the way we experience things" (p. 41).

Morgan (1986) believes metaphors are useful in dealing with the "complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical" (p. 17). Accordingly, he argues that understanding metaphors is an integral part of "the knack of reading situations with various scenarios in mind, and of forging actions that seem appropriate to the reading thus obtained" (p. 11). He also stresses that this mode of analysis is "a way of thinking" rather than "the mechanistic application of a small set of clearly defined analytical frameworks" (p. 16). At an abstract level, metaphors imply theories about the object or event under consideration (Dickmeyer, 1989; Marshall, 1988). Morgan (1986) writes that "Our images or metaphors <u>are</u> theories or conceptual frameworks" (emphasis in original, p. 336), and Johnson (1981) suggests that "all theories are elaboration of basic metaphors or systems of metaphors" (p. 42). In short, metaphors are richly theoretical.

Metaphors and Education

Metaphors often emerge in the description and analysis of complex phenomena. Western society, for example, has been depicted as the beast Leviathan and as a beehive of activity. Many metaphors have been used to describe the human brain, including <u>tabula rasa</u>, information-processing computer, and

hologram (Morgan, 1986). Charles Sharrington, an English scientist, pictured the brain as "'an enchanted loom where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern, always a meaningful pattern though never an abiding one'" (Edwards, 1979, p. 41).

In recent years, metaphors have been used in the analysis of complex organizations. In Images of Organization, Morgan (1986) emphasizes the value of viewing organizations metaphorically as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, or instruments of domination. He suggests that "our theories and explanations of organizational life are based on metaphors that lead us to see and understand organizations in distinctive yet partial ways" (p. 12). Similarly, Brink (1993) suggests that metaphor analysis is useful in charting and gauging the health of business organizations, facilitating development by fostering the formulation of a certain metaphor, and describing the organization to an outsider.

In turning to the study of teachers, teaching, schools, and education, metaphors are members of a family of approaches to this task that include practical knowledge (Elbaz, 1983), narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1990), images (Calderhead & Robson, 1991), and frames (Barnes, 1992). Although differing in details, each of these approaches shares a valuable function in helping to make more explicit what is held to be true implicitly (Clark & Peterson, 1986). They share other functions

as well. For example, Connelly and Clandinin (1988) suggest that images serve as "guides to future action," (p. 60), much in the same way that Taylor (1984b) suggests that metaphor is "the basis of the conceptual systems by which we understand and act within our worlds" (p. 5). The implication in both cases is that an image or a metaphor, like a perspective or a frame, "is an outline scheme which, running ahead of experience, defines and guides it" (Shibutani, 1972, p. 163).

Educational discourse is replete with metaphors which serve a variety of purposes. Elliott (1984) writes:

> Metaphors are widely used in educational discourse and fulfil a variety of functions, such as introducing fresh perspectives, making illuminating comparisons and contrasts, picking out kinds of phenomena not yet named, emphasis, illustration, enlivening dull writing, and many others. (p. 39)

Schools have been viewed as factories (Marshall, 1988), "small societies" (Van Fleet, 1979), and works of art (Sztajn, 1992), and teaching has been compared to gardening, coaching, and cooking (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Higher education, as well, is depicted metaphorically. For example, a workshop for university instructors was entitled "Metaphors We Teach By: An Interactive Workshop on the Pedagogical Implications of the 'Student-as-Customer' Metaphor" ("Workshop," 1994, pp. 1-2). Metaphors have also been brought to bear in the analysis of

curriculum (Munby 1986, 1987, 1990) and the experiences of beginning teachers (Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1992; Dollase, 1992; Ryan, 1992).

Perhaps the most common use of metaphor in education is as a tool for uncovering and exploring assumptions about teaching, learning, and the roles of the teacher and learner (Bullough, 1991, 1992; Bullough et al., 1992; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Collins & Green, 1990)--for "penetrating the unstated ways in which a teacher constructs a professional world" (Munby, 1986, p. 197). As an example, Wood and Phillips (1980) suggest that instructors' metaphors of individuals in small groups have important implications for pedagogy, and Fry and McKinney's (1994) analysis of teachers' discussion of their work reveals a constellation of metaphors of control.

Metaphors provide teachers with a powerful way to talk about their work. Provenzo et al. (1989) believe that metaphors permit teachers to deal with a fundamentally "ambiguous work setting" (p. 551). Focusing on beginning teachers' confusion over teacher roles, Bullough et al. (1992) find "beginning teachers possessing and being possessed by vague, and sometimes even contradictory, teaching metaphors and attendant images" (p. 8). In addition, changes or shifts in a teacher's metaphors for teaching, learning, curriculum, etc., may reveal fundamental changes in perspectives. For example, Bullough et al. (1991) believe that a "loss of innocence" among beginning teachers is accompanied by

changes in their metaphors for the roles of teachers. Conversely, Tobin (1990) finds that changing teachers' metaphors for their teaching roles can result in changing their practice. Metaphors meet a need in teachers as part of "a language close to experience, a language of affect, morality, and aesthetics. . . . a language of images, personal philosophy, rules, practical principles, rhythms, metaphors, and narrative unity" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 59).

Metaphors for Mentoring

This section of the paper is based on information gathered from 137 subjects serving as mentors for beginning teachers. They represent all levels, regular education and special education, and a wide variety of school districts in terms of location, size, and populations served. Each subject participated in some form of mentor training, ranging from brief workshops to graduate courses in mentoring. More specifically, the information is based on 108 surveys, 27 interviews, and 2 course assignments. The subjects were asked directly to provide analogies or metaphors to describe mentoring, based on their experiences. Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were prepared, along with the responses to the relevant survey item and the two course assignments, and analyzed for emergent categories following the principles of constant comparison and analytic induction (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

Interpersonal relationships

The most common metaphors used to describe mentoring focus on interpersonal relationships. Often the relationship between mentor and protege was compared to that between parent and child. One elementary teacher said that mentoring was like "very much like parenting in that while you are raising the child, student, new professional, you aren't raising them for yourself. You're raising them to go out to be his or her own person in life and in the profession." A high school teacher made an important distinction in comparing mentoring to mothering: "Mothering but not hovering. Hovering would be like I'm always following them around and saying, 'Now do this and do that. And don't do this and you shouldn't do that.' That kind of nagging." Other subjects compared mentoring to including giving birth, teaching a child how to ride a two-wheeler, raising teenagers, and providing advice to an adult child. An elementary school teacher suggested that the mentoring relationship evolves from a parent-child relationship, to friendship, and finally to collegiality. A high school teacher compared mentoring to changing a baby's diaper: "It can be very messy at times, but it provides an opportunity to 'talk' with the 'child' and become closer through physical contact which is a growth experience for both the 'changer' (mentor) and the 'changee' (mentee)."

In addition to parent-child, subjects also described mentoring in terms of other kin, including an older brother or

sister, a favorite aunt, and a spouse. However, in comparing being a mentor to being a sibling, one high school teacher also emphasized the need to keep "enough distance so as to promote individuality." One middle school teacher compared mentoring to being a grandparent, with the beginning teacher being her child, and the beginning teacher's students being her grandchildren. She wrote: "I assist and help as much as possible but since the students are not 'mine,' I don't feel the sense of responsibility. When the student are bad--I can leave."

Comparisons were also drawn between mentoring and several other kinds of relationships, including friendship (personal or professional), sponsoring someone in the military or in joining a church, babysitting "for kids I like," "initiating the new kid on the block to the neighborhood club," and being a college roommate who is already familiar with the campus. Two subjects compared the mentor to a supernatural being. One described a mentor as an angel and the other as Cinderella's fairy godmother who turns "the pumpkins handed the girl into vehicles to take her to the ball."

Teaching

Many subjects compared mentoring to teaching. Some compared mentoring to teaching a skill like riding a bicycle or driving a car. A middle school teacher wrote that mentoring is like "teaching a person how to fly. All the studying in the world cannot adequately prepare one for the actual experience.

Mistakes can be costly but the rewards can be wonderful." Two subjects suggested that an inherent problem for the mentor-as-teacher is making explicit what is automatic. One used the example of teaching someone how to ride a bicycle and the other referred to playing a piano. Comparing being a mentor to being a concert pianist, an elementary teacher notes "The vast skill required to make the appropriate notes sound, the years of practice, the hours spent are to no notice as long as the child can recognize a familiar tune."

Several subjects compared mentoring to teaching in a traditional school, but with some differences. The protege-pupil is portrayed as precocious or highly motivated. A special education teacher said that mentoring is like "teaching kids that are receptive because the beginning teacher is anxious to learn." An elementary school teacher said that mentoring "is teaching, but it's a different kind of teaching. It's teaching on a more intimate basis, I guess. Almost like counseling." Viewing proteges as typical middle school students, a specialist wrote, "sometimes they're with you and interested. Sometimes they want to be free and you're just an old hag." Occasionally subjects compared mentoring to serving as a cooperating teacher, but this was the only adult-to-adult relationship in a school setting ever mentioned. However, one middle school teacher did compare being a mentor to being Socrates or Plato.

Metaphors for mentoring also included coaching athletes:

varsity athlete, one-person golf team, or Olympic hopeful. In comparing mentoring to coaching a varsity athlete, one high school teacher wrote that "The new teacher has mastered the basics for the most part but has little 'game' experience." Among the subjects there was mention of three other instances of teaching or leading groups: coaching debate of forensics ("I'm able to pass on my experience, knowledge, short cuts, and suggestions, but the mentee must then use them, make them his/her own."), directing a stage play, and serving as a scoutmaster.

Problem prevention/emergency service

Several subjects compared mentoring to problem prevention or providing emergency services. With respect to preventing problems, one middle school teacher likened a mentor to a family practice physician: "Both promote wellness (good health/teaching). Both help the patient/protege deal with problems as they arise. The goal of course is to head off little problems so they do not become chronic or major problems." An elementary school teacher used as a metaphor for mentoring "a tug boat guiding a ship safely to port."

Comparisons were also drawn between mentoring and providing automobile emergency services: a jump start, 24 hour towing, or general assistance to a stranded motorist. In two cases, mentors were portrayed as providing life-saving measures. One elementary school teacher compared mentoring to "being the safety net for the trapeze flyer in the circus. . . . The safety net assures the

flyer the opportunity to try again without harm," and a middle school teacher described mentoring as "giving a raft to a person tiring of swimming in choppy waters. They have all the skills they need, but the constant struggle of swimming 'upstream' give them the feeling they are sinking." A high school teacher also used the image of swimming in describing mentoring. She said:

> Well, for the beginner of course I just think it's the feeling that they are not drowning, that there really is, maybe not a life preserver, as much as a tree that they can hold to that's above the water, a piece of solid ground that they can somehow use to get their footing to plunge back in.

At the same time, a middle school teacher viewed having a mentor as more of a convenience than a necessity. She wrote, "Not having a mentor is like running out of toilet paper when there is no one else at home. It's possible to get by, but it sure is nice to call out for help when someone else is there."

Providing direction

Some subjects viewed the role of the mentor as one of providing direction. For example, an elementary teacher described a mentor as "serving as a directional compass for someone who could become lost in the woods." In other instances, mentoring was compared to leading others on an expedition over familiar territory or piloting an airplane through unforeseen conditions. However, one special education teacher suggested that the journey may also present new problems to the mentor-as-

guide. She described a mentor as "a normally sighted person leading a myopic person through a maze. The problem is that the normally sighted person occasionally encounters unexpected barriers. Together, both people need to figure out how to surmount the barrier."

Growth and creation

Several subjects referred to growth and development in their metaphors for mentoring, including watching a flower bloom or a caterpillar turn into a butterfly. In other cases, the subjects portrayed the mentor as more actively involved in the process, as in encouraging a blooming bud or sprouting seeds. A special education teacher compared mentoring to planting a summer garden. She wrote:

> I need to do some reviewing and planning in preparation for my successful gardening. The garden needs to be set up for a successful growing season. I need to do a lot of nurturing and hope that other outside factors help my garden to produce a lot of veggies.

In other cases, the subjects describe the mentor as an artist sculpting clay or painting a picture. Using the painting metaphor, a middle school teacher wrote:

> A new teacher is like the canvas. I, as the painter, take great pride in creating a beautiful piece of work. With careful strokes the picture develops. As the painting is completed, I have created a masterpiece. A masterpiece that

everyone wants to have.

Finally, a middle school special education teacher compared the mentor to a tailor who is making a garment for the beginning teacher:

> Mentoring, like custom making a garment, requires professional skill, teamwork, precision, quality, time and attention. It is tailored to individual needs and styles. Mentoring, like custom making a garment, results in a finished outcome unique to the individual.

The mentoring experience for the mentor

In describing their metaphors for mentoring, the subjects often focused on their own positive and negative experiences as mentors. Viewing mentoring as a positive experience, some subjects compared mentoring to a "breath of fresh air." Two subjects compared mentoring to taking a refresher college course. An elementary teacher suggested that mentoring forced her to dust off "the shelves and books that have not been used" for a long time. In a similar spirit, several subjects suggested that mentoring had caused them to "take a look in the mirror" or to relive their youthful idealism as a teacher. For one elementary special education teacher, mentoring was like "stepping back in time and trying to remember all the questions I would have liked the answers to my first year."

Perhaps the most potent metaphors provided by the subjects focused on negative experiences as mentors. Some of these

metaphors reflect uncertainty. One elementary teacher wrote that mentoring was like "entering a contest and never finding out if you won the prize" and a high school teacher compared mentoring to jumping into a swimming pool: "Do I dive in or jump feet first? You know you're going to get wet, but will the water be cold or warm? You'll never know unless you move, but once you have there's no turning back." Because the beginning teacher with whom he was working was reluctant to have the mentor observe her in the classroom, one middle school teacher described mentoring as playing Russian Roulette.

Other metaphors highlighted the teachers' frustrations in serving as mentors, including "flying a kite without wind," "working on an old car without any parts," and "trying to plug a crack in a dam with a pack of chewing gum." One elementary school teacher likened her lack of time for conducting mentoring activities to "stuffing 10 lbs of potatoes in a 5 lb sack" and a high school teacher, emphasizing a lack of support, wrote that mentoring for him was a "Bad dream. My mentee was great but the district help was ZERO." Finally, in describing the highs and lows of mentoring, one compared it to riding a roller coaster and another compared it to riding a hot air balloon.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the metaphors used by teachers to describe their work as mentors are rich and varied. These metaphors are useful in elucidating the

complexities of mentoring and the mentoring relationship. For example, there intuitively seems to be a great difference in the personal investment in mentoring between someone who views being a mentor as raising a child and someone else who sees mentoring as jump-starting a dead car battery. There are also interesting differences between metaphors that portray the mentor as engaging in a dangerous activity like piloting an airplane through a storm and those in which the mentor passively observes a plant growing. It is also reasonable to wonder how successful the match would be between a mentor who views mentoring as throwing a clay pot and a beginner who thinks that a mentor ought to be like a safety net that is there when needed, but which remains in the background.

One initial approach to analyzing systematically metaphors for mentoring may be to compare them to one another, and to place them along various continua for the purpose of discussion. These continua include the following:

RESPONDING <-----> INITIATING

ORDINARY <-----> EXTRAORDINARY

NEGATIVE <-----> POSITIVE

POWERLESS <-----> POWERFUL

INANIMATE <-----> ANIMATE

MECHANICAL <-----> CREATIVE

RISKY <-----> SAFE

AMBIGUOUS <-----> UNAMBIGUOUS

For example, comparing mentoring to watching a flower bloom

suggests far less initiative than planning, planting, and tending a vegetable garden, and viewing a mentor as an angel or fairy godmother is far more extraordinary than seeing a mentor as a kind of teacher or coach.

Metaphors for mentoring may also be useful in preparing teachers to serve as mentors and in research on mentoring. In terms of mentor preparation, metaphors for mentoring might be powerful tools for:

(1) Helping prospective mentors to make explicit their beliefs about mentoring.

(2) Promoting alternative views of the mentor roles, responsibilities, and activities by asking mentors-in-training to consider the implications of different metaphors for mentoring.

(3) Analyzing case studies of mentoring situations from the perspective of metaphors that may guide action.

(4) Promoting mentors' reflection on their roles as mentor.

(5) Highlighting the ambiguity and complexity of mentoring through multiple metaphors.

(6) Promoting dialogue between mentors and their proteges by examining the metaphors for mentoring that each brings to the experience.

(7) Describing mentoring to "outsiders" (e.g., other teachers in a school who are not mentors, principals, superintendents, school board members).

Metaphors for mentoring might also influence the direction of research on mentoring by encouraging the examination of possible relationships between metaphors and variables like (1) level (elementary, middle school, high school), (2) type of teacher (regular education, special education, specialist), (3) years of experience as a teacher and as a mentor, (4) type of school district (rural, suburban, urban; small or large), (5) school culture, (6) purpose of mentoring, (8) perceived value of mentoring, and (7) outcomes of mentoring.

Other points of systematic investigation might include the relationship between metaphor and practice, changes in metaphors attributable to formal preparation, changes in metaphors over the course of a mentoring relationship, and the relationship between metaphors and mentoring in different contexts and with different populations. As the line continues to blur between mentoring of pre-service teachers and mentoring of beginning teachers, a comparison of the metaphors used in each case might be useful in illuminating and enhancing the relationship and its power as a professional development activity.

It is widely accepted that there is much more value to mentoring than helping beginners fill out field trip forms or get ready for parent-teacher conferences. This initial exploration of metaphors for mentoring suggests that systematic investigations of mentoring may have been unnecessarily limited. A more expansive and open-minded approach to mentoring, already

evident in some of the literature (e.g., DeBolt, 1992b, Gehrke, 1991), is clearly in order.

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